

Is Sade An
Anarchist?

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Once Again

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A recent *Guardian* story reporting on a current (as of summer 2023) Barcelona exhibition in relation to the Marquis de Sade, the Western world's most notorious ever libertine, noted of the former French nobleman that:

"Sade's writings were not about sex for the sake of sex. Or rather, they were, but as part of the overarching philosophy that the consummation and realisation of desire, erotic or otherwise, represents the apotheosis of human liberty. Sade was both libertine and libertarian. He critiqued and satirised institutions, often wittily advertising the hypocrisies of church, state, class, law and family."

In a social media bio that I have maintained, I describe myself, in amongst other ways, as an outlaw, a pervert, a heretic, a subversive, a social egoist and a free spirit. In my mind, besides trying to make myself sound as edgy as possible (and, being as honest as a self-reflective human being ever can be, in some ways I am very edgy and in others barely at all), these are all ways of describing genuine aspects of what I see as my fundamentally anarchist character. ("Social egoist" is, in fact, my own novel way to say "anarchist" without using the word "anarchist" for, in modern context, that word has become attached to far too many dumb American juveniles (not entirely a description of these people's ages) who are actually just moral, cultural and political police. These are people who even police discussion of ideas on the Internet as if it was of consequence. Holy Baphomet knows what they would do if a modern Renzo Novatore appeared. Probably call the actual cops and tell them where he was, offering to help them out in any way they could, the total frauds that they actually are.

I am here today to discuss, once again, what an anarchist is because of my recent study of the Marquis de Sade for another book I am writing on sex and its relationship to politics and particularly, of course, to anarchy. That link, I am convinced, is fundamental – for reasons I will be going into at length in that tome. But, in reading and writing about Sade, the question of what he is and how we might describe him raises its ugly head – and that process itself then, quite naturally, raises the wider question “What is an anarchist?”. The way the author of the *Guardian* piece writes about him – as one who pushes the fight for freedom to its ultimate limits, as one who denies and decries any and all institutions which would attempt to stop him doing that – from police and government to marriage and family – makes him absolutely sound like one. If the words I have used of myself to try to describe my own anarchist persona honestly are anywhere near the mark, then Sade has me fairly and squarely outclassed in every single one of them except “social egoist”, my own nomenclature for “anarchist”. Sade, of course, was never formally an anarchist. He couldn’t have been. Writing in the latter half of the eighteenth century, such a political consciousness had not yet been given this name. But, as in the case of several others I have referred to in my past voluminous writing on the subject, that should not stop us naming him so if the cap fits. And, to be frank, I think it does.

In a recent book I published about Sade as part of my researches, however, a 101 page presentation of Sade’s political pamphlet “Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans” which is found embedded within the fifth of seven dialogues that make up Sade’s 1795 work *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, the account of the training of a 15 year old girl in the ways and philosophy of “libertinage” (sexual liberty), I said that Sade was *not* an anarchist. Feeling anxiety the next day that I had got this horribly wrong, I

remembered that I had written that judgment in commentary and interpretation of one quite specific text and not the whole gamut of Sade's oeuvre – which puts him in entirely different light. The pamphlet I had written in relation to tries to describe a kind of political Utopia in which libertinage can take place undisturbed. Its atheist, without moralist oversight, and interferes legally or in an authoritarian way in people's private business as little as possible. It hates marriage and the family as things which constrain sexual liberty. It is, so I judged, I still think rightly, not anarchism - even if it is straining for liberty.

But Sade the sexual libertarian who acts out sexual fantasies in real life and writes much worse ones in his fiction – ones which are not simply diabolical sexual fantasies but also political philosophies for a way of life – he is absolutely an anarchist, isn't he? He wants freedom from things, material things, political things, and he wants freedom to things without the coercion of policing others. Sade, we might say, is a very sexually fixated Renzo Novatore in his attitudes and approach. Novatore sets himself up in print as against all societies and proclaims himself outlaw against any that will set themselves up. His freedom is, first and foremost, a freedom that is his own. Consequently, some much more socially-conceived anarchists – such as fellow Italian Camillo Bernieri – thought that Novatore was some kind of monster. Other people certainly think Sade well qualified for that label. How can an anarchist be someone like Sade? Well, they apparently can be someone like Novatore who, today, can be called an anarchist even if you don't agree with what he thought or how he went about it.

As I think about this, I start to espy a gap: there are "good anarchists" and "bad anarchists". This judgment is not just a contemporary one and might actually be as old as

the invention of “anarchists” as a social movement which is over 150 years ago with the split in the First International which sent Marx and Engels one way and Bakunin and Kropotkin another in terms of what a good socialist was. It was Marxist communism, thought one group of people, and the other thought it was anarchist communism. The anarchists, once defined in their own way and now developing independently of Marx and his tightly controlled Marxist ways, developed their own bad boys (and occasionally girls) who took matters into their own hands, became criminals, agitators, even bombers. They chalked up some notable deaths in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the royal houses of Europe (as well as capitalist robber barons) occasionally felt their sting. But are people who rob and steal and stab cops and blow up people and things anarchists? Many would say not. Others would absolutely say yes. After all, what does “no leaders” or “no gods, no masters” ultimately mean? Surely it doesn’t ultimately mean that there is someone out there – even an anarchist someone – who can tell you what not to do? That, in fact, is exactly the challenge of considering Sade – for Sade bids you consider that your own desire is your arbiter: AND NOTHING ELSE. And he absolutely refuses to compromise on that – even if you come at him to harm him or use your violence against him (as the French state, in multiple guises, in fact did).

In reading Sade and writing about him Max Stirner regularly pops into my head. Stirner is now known as one of the major proponents of “egoism”, a philosophy to which Emma Goldman willingly allied herself at the beginning of her own anarchist activities in a newspaper interview in 1893 after she had been arrested for inciting a crowd. Goldman is thought of by many as a “proper anarchist” and wasn’t exactly half-hearted in the prosecution of her own ideas about that in her own way – as no genuine egoist could be. Egoism is about direct action on your own (or your willing associates’) behalf and about

holding nothing sacred, about having not only no god (atheism) but having no god substitute (law, morality and the human being are all regular candidates here). My own interactions with Stirner led me, when I came to write out some “articles” (on the model of pirate articles of association) defining the anarchism I imagined represented the philosophy as clearly (if personally) as I could, to begin by saying that the anarchist “should hold nothing sacred and so destroy all authority”. This is basically to say we should have no totalising, overarching authorities at all, none whatsoever. This should be ever hereafter an idea space that ceases to exist, a concept we have eliminated from human thought along with our desire to do real, genuine, consequential obeisance to things which politically, economically and morally organise human relationships. We should, instead, be egoistic and serving of our own interests (with such others as freely join with us in solidarity), we should act directly and without asking for permission in the service of our desires. Well, guess what? Sade thought that too.

So, actually, there isn't really any reason *not* to think of Sade, the philosopher of extreme sexual, and so necessarily political, liberty, as an anarchist. Except one. That one reason is the many dumb anarchist policemen (both of today and the past) who thoroughly socialise what they imagine anarchism to be, turning it into a system of social welfare or a Nietzsche-criticisable, “love your neighbour as yourself” Christianisation of society as a whole, a universal and Utopian benevolence which always ends up extremely policing in its mentality and approach and, as far as I am concerned, always will – because that is what it is. This mentality, openly defied by Novatore and always resisted by an Emma Goldman who insisted on the integrity of personal autonomy of thought and action, has goals and wants to end up in a certain place – and this is not a place that holds as values supreme above all those such as personal agency, personal autonomy, absolute freedom

of association, personal affinity and a decentralisation of society which bids people go their own way, mind their own business and simply leave alone those with whom they want nothing to do, a decentralising of society which makes controlling others, or controlling society itself from a centralised point, as impossible as it can, turning it into a true matter of person to person human relationships in the process. The false anarchists, the social do-gooders, the communal policemen, who want to tell people acting on their own conscience in pursuance of their own freedom “you can’t do that because it is not our idea of the common good” seem to eventually hate things like this – no matter how much they might superficially praise them as ideas. But, we must say to them honestly, if you don’t actually do these things and act in accordance with them, then you don’t actually believe in them. They are just words you use to flatter and deceive. What is the actual fibre of your fabric, socially-policing anarchists who rattle on about “accountability” (To who? What for? On what basis?)? The Marquis de Sade honours such principles far more thoroughly and honestly than you. His obsessive and visceral sexual libertinage condemns your social policing as not anarchist, as a parody of anarchism, as controlling social concern that has actually misunderstood the entire point of anarchy: that human beings may act according, and only according, to *their own* freedom.

In a book called *Black Flag: Jolly Roger’s Anarchy*, my 2,000 page *magnum opus* on the subject of anarchy, I sum up anarchy, in a consciously biological way, as “self-organisation”. I love this description of anarchy because it is both very simple to understand and yet also as profound an understanding of what anarchy is about as it gets. It is SELF-organisation. It is not organisation by the government or your family or the Revolutionary Anarchist People’s Committee of Well-Meaning Anarchists. Its SELF-ORGANISATION. Its organisation by and for yourself. By this measure, Sade is as

anarchist as it gets and many self-claimed anarchists are as fake as it gets. In *Black Flag* I looked for models for this. Probably the best one I found was pirates, whether that kind found on seventeenth and eighteenth century ships plying the coasts and seas of the world for bounty as outlaws against nascent capitalist empires or more modern kinds who simply think that laws imposed by criminal political gangs called governments are not things they should have to worry about. Pirates act for themselves, make their own rules of association amongst themselves and don't worry about what anyone else is doing – for they consider their own lives their business and leave others' lives to them. Sade seems like that too. He wants sexual liberty (and the political liberty necessary to enable it) for such as desire it – and as for those that don't, well, if they will just mind their own business somewhere over there then that will be fine. Its about self-organisation and organising yourself – which, of course, means not controlling or interfering with others.

I find this the heart of anarchism and have at least had the honesty, courage and consistency to write 2,000 pages previously saying so and trying to justify it. I think that all I have said and tried to justify in that other book makes Sade inevitably a kind of anarchist – and most especially even if its the case that many anarchists would hate him to be associated with anarchism as a result. Is there then an anarchist acceptance committee? Is there an official anarchist acceptance procedure? What nonsense! Being an anarchist is entirely Self-ID; if you say you are, think you are or act as if you are, then you are. There's no one out there to stop you (although I'm sure some will try!). Sade is then the absolute best kind of anarchist: the kind even anarchists would hate! The kind that out-anarchises the anarchists. How else to demonstrate freedom and liberty than by refusing to abide by even the anarchists' own rules and morality? What are anarchists

doing having “rules and morality” anyway? Sea-faring pirates of yore would occasionally throw out or maroon members of their companies who didn’t act according to their articles of association but they never stopped anyone like this from forming their own companies according to their own rules either and they also allowed people to leave who didn’t agree with them. Such voluntary pirate communities were concerned with themselves and their own behaviour and not with policing the world. Some commentators (notably Gabriel Kuhn in his excellent book, *Life Under The Jolly Roger*) have disdained them for this, arguing that “anarchists” are actually the world-concerned policemen I am here myself disdaining. But if anarchists are actually just cops who think themselves benevolent (which is probably all cops anyway in regard to the lies they need to tell themselves to stay sane) then why ever bother to be one? This is isn’t different – its just more of the same old social coercion that everybody else trades in today.

The anarchist, then, *is* the outlaw. They *are* the pervert, the heretic, the subversive. They *are* the social egoist and free spirit. They are Sade, Novatore, Goldman, Clément Duval, Émile Henry and Émile Armand. They are people who rob, steal, kill and have outrageous sex. They are people whose compass in life is their desires – and nobody else’s or no other institutions’ desires. They are not “respectable” and unconcerned with “what’s best for the common good”. They don’t think there is a “common good” for what is “good” is relative to the person who is thinking about it. They pay no attention to governments or the police (save that attention necessary to preserve their own course) and imagine that your life is your business whilst their life is theirs. They are not averse to joining forces but always insist it is on their own recognisance, a matter of their own agency and autonomy, something revocable at any time. Such anarchists fashion their own socialities for their own purposes; they resist unto death the claims of any sociality

that wants to coerce them with which they have no affinity. They oppose all authority, spiritual, moral, economic or political, because these, of necessity, are the things that would coerce them. They never back down, ask permission, or even imagine they require permission. They are people unchained from outside obligation save any that they impose on themselves.

All that being said, can we remotely comprehend what such anarchy means and obligates? Can we fathom such anarchy's consequences? Sade could. And that's why Sade, overwhelmed by the concern to realise and consummate his desire to the utmost degree and without fear, is an anarchist. And why many other, much lesser committed, people are not.